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**BUILDING THE FORCE OF THE FUTURE: A NEW CALL TO  
ATTRACT, HIRE AND RETAIN THE BEST AND BRIGHTEST TO  
AIR FORCE CIVIL SERVICE**

by

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A Research Report Submitted to the Faculty

In Partial Fulfillment of the Graduation Requirements

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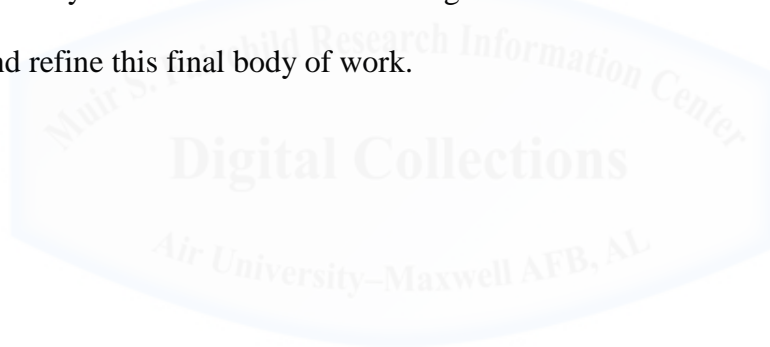
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## **PREFACE**

I want to thank my former supervisor and my current team, the Civilian Force Policy Division, for their constant encouragement and words of wisdom. Likewise I extend my sincere gratitude to my husband and my little girl for their unconditional support while I was diverting much of my free time and attention to this graduate program. I appreciate my research advisors Dr. Greg Intoccia and Dr. Patricia Lessane for their patience and constant advice. This research paper would not have been possible without his and her guidance. Finally, my sincerest appreciations are to my classmates who were willing to take time from their busy schedules to help me shape and refine this final body of work.



## **ABSTRACT**

The purpose of this paper is to assess the existing hiring approach of the Federal government's civil service and demonstrate the shortcomings of the recruitment process in an effort to attract and recruit the best and brightest force of the future. This problem/solution methodology is used to analyze the rigid civilian personnel system, identify areas of weaknesses and recommend a strategic approach that can help the Air Force recruit highly specialized civilian professionals in mission critical occupations such as Cybersecurity, Acquisition, Intel and STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics).

The key findings are these; a federal civil service system full of confusing statutory laws and executive orders left largely intact over the past six decades; a hiring process that lacks the agility to quickly fill vacancies; and finally, a lack of a marketing campaign that leaves many qualified candidates in the dark to job opportunities in the Air Force.

Its keys recommendations include the need to overhaul the current personnel system with the incorporation of hiring flexibilities and to pursue a more deliberate and proactive recruitment effort where the Air Force can strategically identify specific civilian personnel gaps and target candidates where they reside. Accordingly, this paper proposes a number of innovative recommendations that can motivate prospective civilian hires to look at the Air Force as their number one employer of choice.

## **SECTION I: INTRODUCTION**

The current federal civil service system was designed approximately 66 years ago. Since then, it has become an unimaginative institution mired in past policy and regulation that hinders its ability to fill critical civil service billets. In the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, one of the most glaring examples of this is the routine encumbrance of its' the salary wage structure. For mission-critical positions such as cybersecurity, Intel, Acquisition and STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics), as well as the rest of the professional positions, the wage salary is not competitive with corresponding jobs in private sector companies and other federal agencies.

According to the GAO report 14-677 dated July 2014, the civil service job classification system for federal civil service employees was designed in 1949.<sup>1</sup> This design met the need of the day because most federal workers were largely a clerical and administrative workforce. Today, however, these positions are highly specialized and geared towards a technical workforce that is continuously evolving. The technological transformation of the workforce that has made many clerical jobs obsolete is restrained by an antiquated job classification system. Likewise, the veterans' preference hiring authorities the Department of Defense has in place, although well intended, present a unique set of limitations. Laws and regulations governing the veterans' preference are confusing and invite perception of wrongdoing.

Another issue is this; between 2013 and 2014, approximately 46,000 undergraduate students were surveyed to assess their aspiration to work in the federal government. Only 2.4 percent of engineers and 0.9 percent of business students listed the government as their preferred working place.<sup>2</sup> This statistic should obligate policy makers to reassess the current mechanism to attract the cream of the crop that the dynamic private sector is reaping in abundance. If not, it

puts the government at risk in an era when other nation states are vying to obtain global superiority. It is critical, therefore, for the Air Force civilian force of the future to do its part in developing new weapon platforms, protect the Department of Defense cyber infrastructure and create innovative solutions for an increasingly complex operational environment.

The Air Force is committed to strategically forecast recruitment efforts in order to efficiently attract and hire the best and brightest candidate to represent the agency in continued mission success. Despite this effort, the Air Force has experienced civilian billets downsizing and a retirement-driven exodus that have created serious imbalances in the skills of its highly talented civilian workforce. Another headwind facing Air Force recruiting is a heavy demand for cybersecurity talent across all sectors. Since numerous companies in the private sector, US government and military agencies have been victims of security breaches, the competition for the best and brightest has grown more intense. The infiltration of the DOD email network by bad actors to collect information on military movement and a couple of American missile systems are compelling examples why civil service must change.<sup>3</sup> The most recent incident is the massive security breach attack to the Office of Personnel Management leaking personnel data of 4.2 million current and former Federal government employees to include social security numbers and other sensitive data.<sup>4</sup>

Still, the existing civilian personnel system is a rigid pay system and has only changed at the margins since 1949. Highly-skilled STEM professions in the Air Force face the most competition from the private sector. Data obtained from the Federal Salary Council indicates that federal employees, to include STEM professionals, earn approximately 30 percent less than their peers in the private industry and, when they consider other job opportunities, it is extremely hard for DOD agencies to retain them.<sup>5</sup>



The Air Force cannot afford to lose these professionals because the civilian workforce plays a critical role in successfully executing its daily mission. Investing in civilian human capital requires deliberate planning, evaluation, and most importantly, budgeting. The lack of investment into the civilian workforce creates costs and risk factors such as high turnover, loss of critical skills and a longer period of position vacancies. Again, civilian human capital shortfalls can erode the Air Force capacity to effectively carry out its mission.

How can an overhaul to the federal civilian personnel system provide the Air Force the ability to compete with the private sector in an effort to attract, recruit and retain highly talented professionals where the skills of an innovative workforce are critical and essential to the successful execution of the Air Force mission?

The Air Force can overcome the recruitment challenges incurred by a competitive and nimble private sector, by first identifying barriers in the existing civilian personnel system and then proposing bold reforms across the Department of Defense. This approach would create the ability to attract dynamic and well-qualified civilian employees including recent graduates by visiting colleges and universities and conducting job fairs where the talent resides.

This research project will help pinpoint the areas that are placing the Air Force at a disadvantage in the hiring battle and offer initiatives to help it be more competitive despite the attractive earnings and hiring flexibilities utilized by the private sector. In order to accomplish this, the Air Force needs to carefully step back and target the obstacles driven by codified laws and regulations. Additionally, it needs to identify a better path to reach innovative ideas that can assist the Air Force continue to attract, recruit and retain its fair share of civilian talent in a future global workforce market.

To further drive change, the Air Force should propose reforms to these programs; the Pathways Internship Program under Executive Order (E.O.) 13562; the veterans' preference authorities under Title 5 U.S.C §§ 2602 (b)(11), §§ 2301 (b)(1); the Relocation, Recruitment and Retention Incentives salary cap under 5 U.S.C. §§ 5753 and 5754; and finally, a revamp to the position classification system and a radical overhaul to the hiring process. The civil service system needs transformation to better posture the Air Force to attract bright, motivated and mission-driven people. A revolutionary solution is required because without decisive intervention, DOD will continue to lose talent to an innovative and agile private sector.<sup>6</sup>

This research project will utilize the problem/solution method to investigate, interpret and determine the best way to resolve the AF's challenge to attract and recruit highly specialized civilian professionals for mission critical positions. The paper will provide a thorough review of policies addressing the recruitment of civilian employees. More specifically, this paper will analyze the *DODI 1400.25 DOD Civilian Personnel Management* and the Air Force Manual 36-203 *Staffing Civilian Positions* guidance of operational procedures. The paper will also cover specific directives regulating the recruitment and retention of civilian employees in DOD. A report from the August 2014 Merit System Protection Board report entitled *Veteran Hiring in the Civil service*, will be carefully reviewed as well to determine whether, in fact, existing laws and regulations regarding the preferences in hiring veterans are impeding the ability to recruit highly skilled civilian professionals. Again, the goal is to conduct a policy analysis, and clearly identify solutions to the problem.

This paper will also relay a significant amount of relevant facts; therefore, in order to support the claim, the paper will use the evaluation method. The evaluation method will examine the number of students or recent graduates hired by the Air Force that claimed any type of veterans' preference and subsequently compare the numbers against each Air Force mission

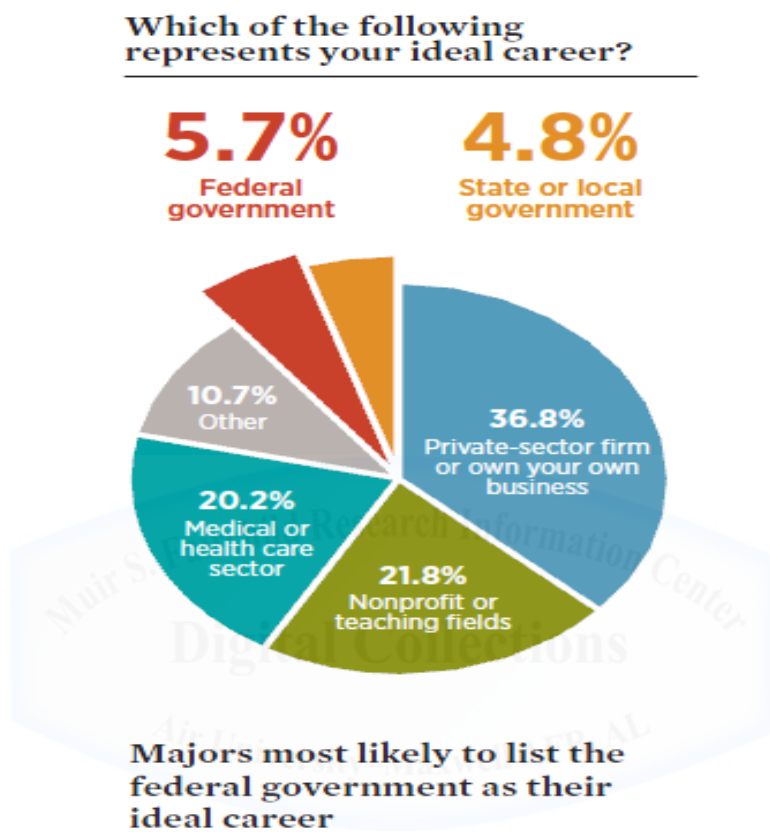
critical position. Existing data will be gathered from reports such as the *Census Bureau Veterans Statistics* and the *Office of Personnel Management (OPM) Employment of Veterans in the Federal Executive Branch Fiscal Years 2009-2014*. Data will be organized, analyzed and compared against Air Force specific recruitment statistics. The results of the evaluation method will determine if in fact it is difficult for the Air Force to recruit the best and brightest from colleges and universities due to the inability to claim any of the veterans' preference categories. A thorough review and evaluation of the recruitment authorities and proper data evaluation will demonstrate if there is justification to create a single veterans' hiring authority. Lastly, the research project will lead to conclusions with succinct proposals on how the Air Force should proceed to attract the best and brightest and ultimately build the force of the future.

## **SECTION II: BACKGROUND**

Currently, the Air Force faces challenges with respect to attracting and recruiting STEM graduates and utilizes a passive approach in regards to hiring students and college graduates. Under the current recruitment strategy, the Air Force waits for candidates to discover job opportunities in the Department instead of strategically identifying specific personnel gaps and targeting candidates where they reside. These challenges are not only faced by the Air Force but also by the rest of federal agencies.<sup>7</sup>

In 2013, the National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE) surveyed 37,874 students from approximately 644 colleges and universities across 50 states about their post-graduation employment plans, ideal workplace locations, and salary expectations. The results of the survey demonstrated that, despite the student's strong attraction to work in the federal government, only 5.7 percent listed the federal civil service as their ideal place to work compared to 36.8 percent who listed the private sector<sup>8</sup>. Students also rated job attributes in

terms of importance, indicating personal growth and professional development as the most important attributes. Job security, an attractive insurance and benefits package, and friendly co-workers followed that list.<sup>9</sup> Figure 1 below provides a graphic view of survey results.



**Figure 1. How College Students View Federal Employment.**

(Adapted from “College Students are Attracted to Federal Service, but Agencies need to Capitalize on their interest,” *Partnership for Public Service & the National Association of Colleges and Employers*, [March 2014]: 2)

Likewise, the NACE student survey demonstrated that college students underutilized USAJOBS, the federal government job search engine, as compare to LinkedIn, Career Builders and Monster. Only 8.8 percent of the students reported job searching in USAJOBS, while 17.3 percent used LinkedIn, 15.5 percent used Career Builder, and 14.5 percent used Monster.<sup>10</sup>

Career Builder also corroborated competition for talent in their 2014 STEM report, *Understanding How Today’s Top Talent Can Solve the Skills Gap*, which confirms federal

government challenges with recruiting top talent in areas of physical science, computer science, engineering, and mathematical science positions.<sup>11</sup> The extremely high demand for STEM talent puts significant pressure on the private and public sectors and, in turn, urges them to use innovative and creative methods to hire the best individuals as quickly as possible. Many factors contribute to the unfair competition between the private and public sector, and this section identifies the most significant areas impeding the Air Force's ability to attract and recruit talented individuals.

### **Federal Civil Service**

To understand the current disadvantage facing the Air Force, an understanding of the evolution of the Federal Civil Service is required. It was first established in 1871 and experienced a series of transformations with the purpose to establish a position classification system based on duties rather than salaries.<sup>12</sup> The Federal Civil Service implemented the General Schedule (GS) classification system under the Classification Act of 1949.<sup>13</sup> The system was codified in title 5, United States Code (chapter 51) and stressed the principle of equal pay for equal work, in other words, employees who are doing similar level of work receive similar level of pay.<sup>14</sup>

A minor change was made in 1963, when President Kennedy signed Executive Order 11073 that allowed employees to advance steps faster without the required waiting period. This is referred to as quality step increase, but is utilized only if the employee performance is considered exceptional. While these elements were the first attempt to incorporate a sort of pay for performance system, managers and supervisors did not have the flexibility to set pay for the employees they managed.

Then in 1978, the GS system underwent further tweaking; the classification system was divided into 18 different pay grades and subsequently the top three levels were separated from

the first 15 levels when the Senior Executive Service was created by the Civil Service Reform Act of 1978 under President Jimmy Carter.<sup>15</sup> Each GS grade level is composed of ten equal levels known as steps and when a new employee is hired into civil service, it is expected that he or she will enter at the lowest or first step. Progression through the steps or within-grade-increase is based on performance and longevity. By law, it must meet three requirements: 1) performance must be at an acceptable level meaning fully successful or above; 2) the employee must have completed the required waiting period for advancement; and 3) the employee must not have received an equivalent increase in pay during the waiting period.<sup>16</sup> There is a required waiting period for advancement to the next higher step as follows:

52 weeks of creditable service to advance from step 1 to 2; 2 to 3 and 3 to 4

104 weeks of creditable service to advance from step 4 to 5; 5 to 6 and 6 to 7

156 weeks of creditable service to advance from step 7 to 8; 8 to 9 and 9 to 10<sup>17</sup>

### **Position Classification System**

Under the competitive civil service, the Office of Personnel Management (OPM) has the final authority and responsibility to prepare, develop and publish position classification standards in accordance with title 5 U.S.C. Federal agencies are required to classify a position in a manner that is consistent with published standards and OPM has the final authority over the standards.

While under the law, each agency has the authority to administer the General Schedule classification system for its own positions, including the authority to organize and assign work, they cannot deviate from the classification standards established by OPM.<sup>18</sup> The Air Force as well as the rest of the DOD and federal agencies is ruled by the OPM classification system.

OPM administers the GS classification system and has a total of 420 standardized position occupations and are grouped by 23 occupational families and 15 statutorily-defined grade levels. The classification system is a mechanism for organizing federal white-collar work,

notably for the purpose of determining pay, based on a position's duties, responsibilities and difficulties.<sup>19</sup>

### **Veterans' Preference Eligibility and Authorities**

Not only is employment in the federal civilian workforce subject to the merit system principles, but to veterans' preference as well. The merit system principles require that recruitment should be from qualified individuals from all segments of society and selection should be determined solely on the basis of an individual's knowledge, skills and ability after fair and open competition, to ensure that all receive equal opportunity.<sup>20</sup>

However, veterans' preference is a statutory exception to the merit system principles, recognizing the sacrifices made by members of the Armed Forces and comes from the Veterans' Preference Act of 1944. Veterans' preference has been provided in some form since the Civil War and offers a uniform method by which special consideration is given to qualified candidates seeking employment in the civil service. By law, veterans who are disabled or who served on active duty in the Armed Forces during certain specified time periods or in military campaigns are entitled to preference over others in hiring from competitive lists of eligible veterans and also in retention during reductions in force.<sup>21</sup>

Veterans' preference eligibles are either awarded with 5 or 10 veterans points and are placed at the top of the qualify category for which they are ranked, and cannot be passed over to select a non-preference candidate without OPM approval.<sup>22</sup> Additionally, veterans who are minimally qualified and who have a 10 percent or higher compensable service-connected disability will automatically be placed at the top of a list of all eligible candidates, including those with higher qualifications.<sup>23</sup> The Air Force is obligated to follow veterans' preference legal requirements and make sure the selections are made solely on the basis of relative ability,

knowledge and skills after fair and open competition criteria is met as described in the merit systems principles.<sup>24</sup>

Current hiring preferences ascribe to individuals who have either served in the military for a set period of times, when some sacrifices have been made in service to the Nation, or in honor of special relationship circumstance, such as to someone other than the veteran such as the veteran's spouse, widow(er) or mother. The OPM Vet Preference Guide specifies six different types of preference authorities that agencies may apply. Figure 2 below summarizes each of the veterans' preferences, the policy and governing statute, and shows a brief definition of each authority.

Authority	Policy and Governing Statutes	Descriptions
30 Percent or More Disabled Veteran Authority (30 Percent DVA)	5 U.S.C. 3112; 5 CFR 316.402(b)(4); 5 CFR 315.707	Provides agencies an effective way to quickly hire eligible disabled veterans to any position for which they are qualified without announcing the job.
Veterans Recruitment Appointment (VRA)	38 U.S.C. 4214; 5 CFR 307; 5 CFR 315.705	Allows agencies to quickly hire by appointing eligible veterans to positions for which they are qualified, up to and including GS-11 or equivalent.
Veterans Employment Opportunities Act of 1998 (VEOA)	Pub. L. 106-117 of Nov 30, 1999; 5 CFR 315.611	Allows agencies to consider eligible veterans without using more restrictive competitive examination procedures by allowing them to compete with Federal employees under promotion and internal placement procedures.
Non-Competitive Appointment of Certain Military Spouses	E.O. 13473; 5 CFR 315.612, Subpart F	Agencies may appoint to competitive service positions qualified military spouses who relocate with their service member spouse as a result of permanent change of station orders; whose service member spouse incurred a 100% disability because of active duty service <sup>25</sup> ; or whose service member spouse was killed while on active duty.
Special Schedule A Appointing Authority for Family Members of Active Duty Military and Civilians	5 CFR 315.608	To provide employment opportunities to spouses and family members of active duty military members and civilian employees stationed in foreign areas.
Training Program Certified (Disabled Veterans Enrollment in a VA Training Program)	38 USC, chapter 31; 5 CFR 315.604	Hiring authority for disabled veterans who have satisfactorily completed a approved course of training prescribed by the Department of Veterans Affairs under chapter 31 of Title 38.

**Figure 2. Veterans' Preference Authority**

(Adapted from the *Hiring Authorities Chart* created by the HQ AF/A1CP, [May 2015], 2)



The Air Force has discretion to fill vacant positions with any of the appointment authorities, such as the merit promotion. They may select from a list of reinstatement-eligible candidates, allowing priority to well-qualified candidates meeting the definition of a displaced or surplus employee. To be hired, in most of the cases, the area of consideration under the merit promotion applies only to individuals already in the agency, which negates veterans' preference eligibility. Veterans' preference does not apply to internal merit promotion and placement procedures and was not intended to be applied to promotion, reassignment, change-to lower grade, reinstatement or transfer.<sup>26</sup> However, under the Veterans Employment Opportunities Act (VEOA), veterans in full-time permanent federal government positions may use their preference to apply for jobs on external announcements, availing themselves of veterans' preference for purposes of promotion and internal placement as well as initial appointment.<sup>27</sup>

### **Direct Hiring Authorities**

The Air Force also relies on the usage of Direct Hiring Authorities in order to meet the needs of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. The Office of Personnel Management has appointing hiring authority that allow agencies to expeditiously fill civilian vacancies when there is a shortage of candidates or a critical hiring need for a position or group of positions in the competitive service at GS-15 grade level or below.<sup>28</sup> The hiring authority may be initiated independently by OPM if they decide there is a severe shortage of candidates government-wide for one or more occupational series. Agencies can also seek direct hiring authority approval from OPM and must provide relevant and significant evidence to support the request which includes extensive recruitment efforts, extended announcement periods and use of hiring flexibilities such as recruitment, retention and relocation bonuses.<sup>29</sup>

In addition, direct hiring authorities exist in certain civilian career fields and agencies can use them once they are able to demonstrate a severe shortage of candidates. However, they must comply with job announcement requirements under title 5 U.S.C. , sections 3327 and 3330, stating that these agencies “shall keep a current, comprehensive list of all announcements of vacant positions in the competitive service”.<sup>30</sup> The list of direct hiring authorities is applicable to the following civilian occupations: Diagnostic Radiologic Technologist, Medical Officer, Pharmacist, Nurse, Veterinary Medical Officer, Information Technology Management (information technology positions), Acquisition positions and positions involved in Iraqi reconstruction efforts.<sup>31</sup>

## **Hiring Process**

Successful recruitment encompasses making a continuous, long-term investment in attracting a high-quality workforce capable of accomplishing the organization’s mission now and in the future. As of today, the hiring process begins after determining whether a vacancy announcement will be internal or external. Internal job announcements can take many forms. For example, it can limit the pool of applicants from a category called *status applicants*. Applicants with status are permanent federal employees in the competitive service or Title 5 and can come from any federal agency.<sup>32</sup> This type of restricted announcement would preclude external individuals from applying. However, as explained earlier, certain veterans eligible under the Veterans Employment Opportunities Act (VEOA) may also apply even if the announcement was limited to internal candidates.<sup>33</sup>

Internal announcements are also restricted to individuals with reinstatement eligibility meaning those who have previously held a career or career-conditional appointment in the competitive Federal service. There is no time limit on reinstatement eligibility for those who

either have veterans' preference, or acquired career tenure by completing three years of substantially continuous creditable service.<sup>34</sup>

On the other hand, external job announcements have no restrictions and any U.S. citizen can apply. Like internal job announcements though, when a vacancy is posted as external, the announcement must remain open for a proscribed period of time, list skill set requirements, and convey to the applicants on what grounds they will be assessed.

Federal employees occupying temporary appointments or appointed in positions outside the competitive service like the excepted service employees under Title 10 are considered external employees. Internal and external applicants interested in federal jobs are required to submit an online resume via USAJOBS at [www.usajobs.gov](http://www.usajobs.gov). If requested, the application is accompanied by: 1) proof of military service, 2) proof of federal service, 3) copy of the most current performance evaluation, 4) proof of service connected disability, 5) a copy the college transcripts and 6) a letter that indicates the applicant is a displaced federal employee if he or she is claiming priority placement under the Career Transition Assistance Program (CTAP) or the Interagency Career Assistance Program (ICTAP).<sup>35</sup>

### **Pathways Program**

On December 27, 2010, two programs were added and one modified to facilitate employment in Civil Service by Executive Order 13562.<sup>36</sup> Rolled out in 2012, The Pathways Program for DOD is basically a three pronged internship program for potential applicants to gain permanent working status in Federal Civil Service. The program offers three routes to permanent full time work and they are known as the Internship, Recent Graduates and the reworked Presidential Management Fellows Programs. Unlike some internship programs that are non-compensatory by design e.g. congressional aides, these components to the Pathways Program are

paid positions with benefits and are offered on a trial basis. Also, common prerequisites to these programs is the requirement to be degree seeking or having certification in hand from a qualifying institution recognized by OPM and applying within a 24 month window of their date of certification. Veterans have up to 72 months if the application delay is due to military service.<sup>37</sup>

The program that is the broadest by design is the Internship Program. It is for students still actively working on completing their certification program.<sup>38</sup> It allows for a larger pool of applicants from high school, vocational training and post-secondary education, including graduate school. If selected after the gaining agency determines the candidate meets the requirements of the job description, new hires must complete 640 hours at their job, complete certification if still in school, and have a letter of recommendation from their immediate supervisor. Consistent with OPM rules, Internship announcements must be posted on USAJOBS.

To qualify for the next Pathways initiative, applicants must possess a two, four, graduate or doctorates degree from an OPM approved institution.<sup>39</sup> Differing from candidates brought on into the Internship Program to perform Wage Grade (WG) or General Schedule (GS) jobs, the Recent Graduates program is a full time mentoring program, developing new employees for General Schedule work only. Also falling under the purview of the DOD recent graduate programs are two other internship programs known as Palace Acquire and Copper Cap. Here too, applicants must apply within two years of certification unless the person is a veteran (up to 6 years). When the candidate finishes his or her continuous one year commitment, a successful evaluation by a supervisor and meeting the requirements published in the job description earns the intern a full time position in Federal Civil Service. Again, the solicitation for these positions must be posted on USAJOBS. Last but not least is the Presidential Management Fellows Program. Normally referred to as PMF, OPM directly oversees this program and advertises

vacancies on USAJOBS for two weeks at the beginning of each fiscal year, October 1-15. Originally signed into law by Executive Order in 1977 and amended again in 2003, the new version became the third component in the newly conceived Pathways Program of 2010.<sup>40</sup> PMF is extremely selective and seeks out candidates with strategic management qualities to make new policy or be the lead in its implementation. The vetting out process is intense, beginning with the application, a battery of on-line assessments and essay assignments, and undergoing multiple in person interviews. This program is very competitive as only 10% of applicants get picked up since its makeover in 2010. Recently, a STEM track was added as well to address the shortage of this skillset in Federal Government. Once hired into the PMF, a two year hitch is required.

The Air Force assesses its needs every year and then reaches out to Pathway Program applicants. Submitting applications through USAJOBS is the only way candidates can be considered. The Air Force also adheres to strict OPM standards, revised in 2010 with the intent to raise the number of qualified applicants and throughout the selection process, and candidates will be racked and stacked accordingly.

### **SECTION III: ANALYSIS**

The current federal hiring model, as described in the background section of this paper has been left largely intact over the past six decades and has grown long in the tooth by existing structural weaknesses. Exposed by a rapidly changing technical environment that can threaten our nation's superiority, hiring the best and brightest human capital now is imperative. However, an outdated position classification system, complicated veterans' hiring rules and the lengthy hiring process are all chief deficiencies to acquiring this top tier talent. Also hampering the recruitment process is the inadequate outreach by Federal Civil Service to recent graduates or directly hiring student talent. Finally, DODs lack of branding focus or creation of a strategic

marketing campaign may leave many qualified candidates in the dark to opportunities to work for civil service.

### **Antiquated Position Classification System**

To get a better understanding of the weaknesses of the federal hiring process, a look into the existing position classification system is required. Mr. James E. Colvard, one time Director of OPM once quipped, “the current classification system allows the manger to be precisely wrong. What the manager needs is the opportunity to be roughly right.”<sup>41</sup> The one size fits all pay system for GS employees at each grade and step established by OPM was intended to adhere to spirit and letter of the law of the merit system principles; equal pay for equal work. However, since 2002, questions within OPM and DC area think tanks began to materialize in regards to the viability of the current classification regime in place impacting all agencies and Title 5 employees regardless of mission. After brainstorming the pros and cons of its merits, OPM went on record to recommend some form of autonomy for agencies so they can cater compensation to fit their needs. The non-profit Partnership for Public Service, also vocalized their recommendations to change the pay system immediately as it fails to recognize the skills and importance of workload by GS workers assigned to the myriad federal agencies.<sup>42</sup>

In today’s highly technical environment, classifying officials must be up to the task to comprehend the subtleties of the occupation and the individual positions imbedded in these occupations in order to ensure the right person gets the right job and is properly compensated for it. A lack of clarity in the classification process may cause confusion and inequities in employee pay and proper grading.<sup>43</sup> In fact, Federal Law mandates OPM to conduct oversight and provide guidance to all federal departments under its purview to effectively implement the GS system.

As previously articulated, OPM has full authority and responsibility for occupational standards it designs. It also is empowered to, after meeting with agency heads, revise job standards as well. Even though OPM began over a decade ago to question its own practices, the last formal review or official record of updates that can be found for the 124 occupations it oversees is 1990. More alarming yet,, according to GAO report 15-619, is the fact that OPM has failed to conduct any type of classification audit in any agency since the 1980s because such an effort was considered an exhaustion of resources by leadership at that time.<sup>44</sup> How can OPM show to all concerned stakeholders (agency chiefs, employees, taxpayers) that the current GS standards on the books are meeting the needs of the agencies and addressing their priorities when the status quo has remained relatively unchanged?

### **Complicated Veterans' Hiring Authorities**

Another weakness in today's federal hiring system, although mandated by statutory law with good intentions at its core, is the creation of the various Veteran Hiring Authorities and its impact on OPM, and more specifically, DODs hiring decisions. Since 1944 and in some shape or form, Congress enacted legislation to promote the employment of U.S. Veterans of War in Federal Civil Service.<sup>45</sup> Despite the laws intentions to take care of the warfighter, many much iterations exist such as the Veterans Employment Opportunities (VEOA), Veterans Recruitment Appointment (VRA) and the Disabled Veteran Authority (DVA), making federal recruitment a complex undertaking. First, the DVA allows agencies to quickly hire a veteran with 30% or more documented injuries from combat related service without announcing the job.<sup>46</sup> The VEOA on the other hand, allows agencies to consider eligible veterans without using restrictive competitive examination procedures and allows them to compete with Federal employees under promotion

and internal placement procedures.<sup>47</sup> Lastly, the VRA authority permits agencies to hire eligible veterans that meet qualifying criteria, up to the GS-11 pay grade or its equivalent.<sup>48</sup> Therefore, considering the intricacies of these seemingly contradictory but paradoxical rules, it is not a stretch of the imagination to see where mistakes can be made and how managers can err in the hiring process, attempting to decipher what can be considered a labyrinth of codified laws. On the flip side, the multiple rules may confuse veteran and non-veteran applicants' alike and invite the perception of foul play.

Besides the complicated landscape of Veteran hiring regulations, recent statistics from a sampling of five fiscal years revealed DOD hired Veterans at a greater clip as external hires under VEOA authority than under merit system principles.<sup>49</sup> This essentially closes the door on qualified non-veteran, U.S. citizen applicants. Even some Veterans already permanent hires in Federal Civil Service may perceive they were improperly passed over by this non-competitive hiring rule precluding all opportunity to apply to the advertised vacancy. A violation of veteran's preference might incorrectly be assumed by internal veterans especially if, by entitlement, they would have rated higher than the external selectee. To other well qualified applicants without any military service or its accompanying corporate knowledge, whatsoever, have very little chance to compete and might perceive the system is altogether rigged in favor of veterans.

For those veterans already hired, the VRA has a few twists and turns that everyone can find objections to its intent. VRA stipulates if a hired veteran has fewer than 15 years of formal education (high school, college, trade school, etc.); the hiring agency shall provide additional training regardless of skill level or the job description requirements. The impacted veteran may dimly view this coercive training as unfavorable to his appraisals or career. Conversely, some civilians may walk away with the perception as another case of the good old boy system, of only taking care of the veteran.



## **Lengthy and Cumbersome Hiring Process**

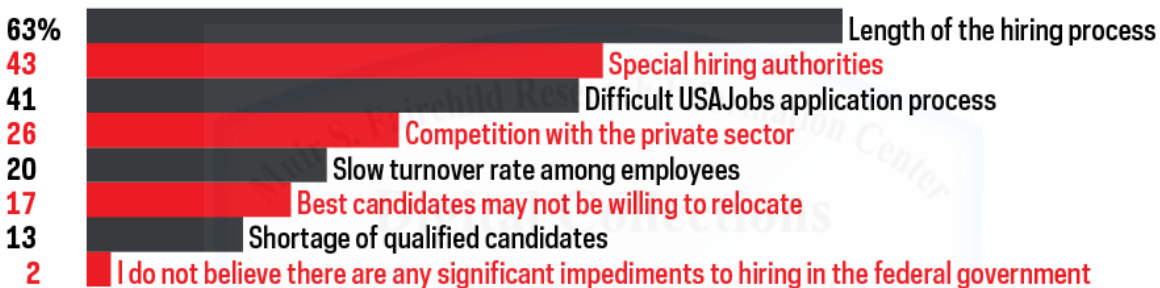
Not only can the Veterans Hiring Authorities be difficult to navigate for applicants, but the federal hiring process itself, from posting to filling the vacancy, is a marathon event. On average, it takes one agency like the Air Force, to fill one slot in the competitive hiring process, a 125 days. At Google, by contrast, because of their second to none flexibility to hire desirable candidates immediately, it takes two months to fill 60 positions.<sup>50</sup> OPMs hiring process is cumbersome because of antiquated policies and rules that cannot be circumvented. Therefore, the entire model of OPM recruitment consumes blocks of time in the name of quality while speed is tossed out the door. (see figure 3). However, what is lost on the Title 5 apparatus is the real potential to losing well qualified candidates to the private sector or other external federal agencies. If the vacancy advertisement has pre-requisites to employment like a background check or a complete physical by a medical professional, then the hiring process drags on even longer, creating even greater applicant attrition.

So it's no surprise then that many, including recent graduates, find the application process complicated, energy draining and sometimes fruitless. A student survey conducted by the National Association of Colleges and Employers indicated that 37 percent of respondents interested in Federal Careers did not understand the application process and 49 percent thought the process was too lengthy and complicated.<sup>51</sup> The root of the problem is poor quality describing the vacancy coupled with obscure or arcane language on how to apply.<sup>52</sup> USAJOBS is a roll up your sleeves event in clear need of an upgrade, especially in regards to its search engine. It needs to be more intuitive for the applicant and the job he or is she is trying to land. In fact, the entire machine, USAJOBS and OPM are out of touch, lacking emotional intelligence and professional courtesy. An example of this would be interested graduate students, who submit multiple applications through USAJOBS and yet do not get a reply for months and sometimes

never.<sup>53</sup> For a student, more likely than not loaded down with student debt, applying for a job with Uncle Sam is the work of Sisyphus, a doomed figure in Greek mythology, experiencing repeated failure while applying to one black hole after another. The Government Business Council surveyed Federal Employees in late 2014 concerning the hiring process and found out that many who responded referenced the special hiring authorities and the slow process to fill vacancies as the top impediments to hiring.<sup>54</sup> Figure 3 below illustrates the results of the survey.

### In your opinion, which of the following are the most significant impediments to hiring qualified candidates in the federal government?

RESPONDENTS COULD CHOOSE UP TO THREE



It can take several months to fill a vacancy in government, by which time many candidates lose interest or find employment elsewhere. Respondents cite "cronyism" and "the good old boys club" as impediments to hiring the best candidates, along with federal rules that give preference to certain groups, such as veterans.

SOURCE: GOVERNMENT BUSINESS COUNCIL

#### Figure 3. Significant impediments to hiring qualified candidates.

(Adapted from Kellie Lunney "Held Back: Why the government struggles so much with job one: hiring" *Government Executive*, Vol 47, No. 1 [Jan/Feb 2015]: 25)

The Air Force aims to fill positions within 80 days in concert with OPM's 80-day hiring model. According to the most recent civilian hiring statistics, the Air Force met the 80-day hiring model with internal hires (see figure 4). However, external hires and hires requiring a delegated examination remain at 115 and 125 days respectively (figure 4). Estimates of today's hiring process and timeline are:

15 days from identification of hiring need to job announcement;

30-45 days to return the referral list to the hiring manager;

15-30 days to conduct interviews and vet out the best candidates;

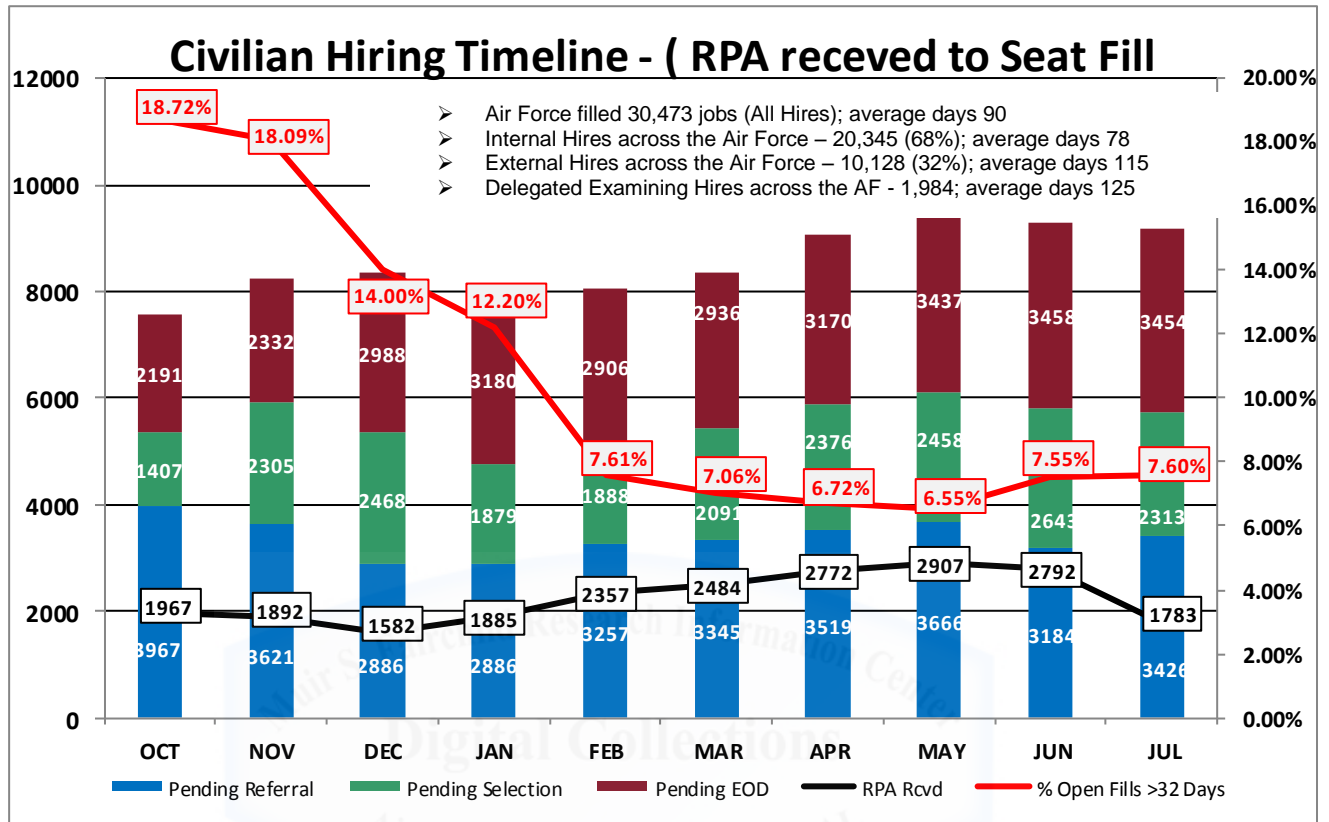
5-15 days to issue tentative and firm job offers and position acceptance;

60 days to process security clearance, Permanent change of Station (PCS) orders (if applicable);

15-30 days to obtain Common Access Card (CAC), computer and phone once the new hire is in-processed.



Timeframe 1 Oct 14 – 10 Jul 15 (Closed)



**Figure 4. End-to-End Civilian Hiring Timeline.**

(Adapted from AF/A1CP, Performance Measures, Every Dollar Count, Slides, [Aug 2015])

### Inability to Directly Hire Student Talent

The requirement to post vacancy announcements in USAJOBS impedes managers' ability to target specific talent pools when filling critical positions. Frequently Air Force managers are not able to capitalize on the talents of the full range of candidates such as students, recent graduates and others not currently in the federal workforce because they are passively recruited and not within credible reach of the hiring authority. For example, consider if a manager targets a critical skill at College A campus. Private sector corporations with on the spot hiring ability are already present vying for the same top talent. In contrast, the DOD manager must direct students

to apply to a website along with the public because OPM rules implementing the provisions of the Pathways program prohibits recruiters from making offers directly.<sup>55</sup> The position is given public notice which means hundreds (who do not attend College A campus) may apply. If the DOD manager is not successful in recruiting at College A, as he/she must select priority candidates before reaching over to non-priority candidates such as the students. Feedback among College A students is that you must be a applicant with status (internal employee) or a veteran to get hired at DOD.

### **DOD Lacks Strategic Communication or Branding Focus:**

The Department of Defense does a poor job communicating its own jobs and lacks a marketing campaign that clearly articulates the advantages of working with the agency. Although generous benefits and job security is normally well known by potential candidates, very little is known about specific job advancement opportunities, work-life flexibilities and the innovative and meaningful work DOD can offer.<sup>56</sup> There are a significant number of benefits such as retirement savings plans, generous annual and sick leave, compensatory time for travel, credit hours, physical fitness programs, affordable health and group life insurances and work schedule flexibilities that few companies can match.

## **SECTION VI: RECOMMENDATIONS**

The current model, a rigid recruitment system for civilian employees, applied across all agencies and governed by the Office of Personnel Management (OPM), is based on what is called the Merit System Principles. Having done an adequate job in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, the aircraft carrier known as Civil Service is struggling to do the same in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century due to rapid technological change, thereby harming many agencies, including the Air Force. This paper

proposes the following five recommendations to solve the Air Force's problem to attract recruit and retain civilian employees with the skills, talent and expertise necessary to meet the challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

1. Civilian Human Resources Reengineering Team: The existing internal hiring process creates unnecessary work and adds to the time it takes the Air Force to make a job offer. Per the Merit System Protection Board Report entitled, *Attracting the Next Generation: A Look at Federal Entry-Level New Hires*, agencies should evaluate their hiring processes, determine improvements and implement change.<sup>57</sup> In order to evaluate the hiring process and identify unnecessary obstacles, the Air Force should propose to establish a reengineering team responsible for the end-to-end review of the hiring process to include reviewing established policies, identifying the best practices and also the impediments toward the human resources hiring process. The intent of this team is to streamline the hiring process to reach the 80 days end-to-end goal and focus on a transparent, measurable and accountable process. The team should be composed of an AF-level group of seasoned HR personnel and non-HR senior hiring managers (GS 14s and 15s or equivalent) across the Major Commands (MAJCOMs) with significant HR experience. The membership of the reengineering team should be diverse and include members from private industry and academia, hired as paid consultants than can research best practices across government and industry. These consultants also could provide the extra eye balls needed and provide Air Force hiring managers new out of the box recommendations. Their charter would include the improving of not only the hiring cycle time, but also the HR system in perpetuity, with the use of a Lean Six Sigma model. The team would include making HR recommendations to AF/A1C for further study or implementation across the AF in a consistent manner. Lastly the team should consider private industry hiring methods and metrics, necessary hiring flexibilities, system barriers and timeliness issues.

The creation of a reengineering team could help the hiring process significantly because the members would have the opportunity to review every step of the recruitment process and identify waste (unnecessary delays and hand-offs) with a goal of standardizing the process across the MAJCOMs and host Rapid Improvement Events (RIEs) to determine best practices. Consultants from the private sector are vital to the success of the reengineering team and their experience outside of OPM traditional hiring practices can assist hiring managers and HR Specialists to get a more efficient and streamlined process in place. It is very common to hear from candidates that the hiring process takes approximately six months from the time the position become vacant to the time the person comes on board. The identification of various segments in the recruit and fill process would allow the team to strategize ways to improve the hiring automation in USAJOBS and propose innovative changes that can improve the application experience of the applicant.

2. Civilian Scholarship Program: Current hire procedures and incentives are inadequate to attract and hire a diverse population of highly talented students, especially attracting students at the high school level before they enter college. In order to assist in future development of a diverse, high-performing, results oriented and responsive civilian workforce, the Air Force can propose to the Department of Defense to create a centrally funded scholarship program similar to the Reserve Officers' Training Corps (ROTC). The program could be developed as a pilot program to provide scholarships and internships to graduating high school seniors who plan on attending a four-year college program focused on core capability areas of the Air Force. The scholarship program would be piloted at ten universities around the country with academic studies aligned with DOD Mission Critical Occupations (MCOs) such as Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics, Physics, Computer Science, Cyber, Nuclear and Acquisition. The internship portion of the program would integrate academic theory with workplace experience

for students during academic summer and winter breaks. Valuable experience gained through the program would enable students to be prepared upon graduation to begin a career in the Air Force and would streamline lengthy hiring times and processing security clearances. The scholarship will cover the cost of books, tuition, room as well as money for a stipend or GS salary rate for internships, in return for entering government service when the student's academic work is completed. It would be awarded for a specific time and will cover a two or four year college degree program depending on degree requirements.

Following graduation, the students shall incur a service obligation of four-years after graduation. The student would be responsible for reimbursing the government for cost incurred if they do not complete the program. Students who receive a scholarship would also be required to perform a summer internship with the Air Force and may work part-time or part-time during other breaks in their academic studies. Investing in scholarships for civilians and requiring scholarship recipients to work for the Department for a set time period after graduation would help the hiring process because it allows the Air Force to develop a pipeline of extremely talented individuals and provide an incentive for students to remain in the Air Force as a career choice. The civilian scholarship program would also develop a high performance, results oriented and responsible civilian workforce. DOD requires a range of skills in hard-to-fill occupations and needs to build a strong pipeline of top talent to meet the force of the future. This civilian scholarship program could be likened to an AAA baseball farm club; developing the talent to perform at the professional level for the Air Force.

3. College Campus Hiring: The Department of Defense faces a number of challenges with respect to attracting and recruiting STEM graduates to help fill critical research and development and science technology billets. Currently, there is a supply and demand imbalance degrading DOD's ability to acquire and retain the right technical talent to execute mission



requirements. To mitigate the issue, the Air Force should propose a special hiring authority that can give DOD the flexibility to hire students and recent graduates in Mission Critical Occupations (MCOs) directly from colleges and universities without the need to post job announcements in USAJOBS. Hiring top student talent will require changes to current hiring authorities, recruiting methods, and recruitment incentives. The hiring authorities currently available to recruit external talent such as Pathways Program and the Expedited Hiring Authority should be revised to allow for flexibilities to sustain a viable and diverse future force in the long-term. It is recommended these hiring authorities be revised to allow for the hiring of students and graduates to meet mission-critical requirements by: 1) eliminating job announcement, 2) adhering to veterans' preference without the public notice requirement, and 3) establishing a veterans' recruitment authority like direct hire for veterans. The implementation of a direct college campus hiring authority would be a shot in the arm because it would give hiring managers the flexibility to develop strategies that can provide a steady stream of potential individuals in highly specialized occupations. The ability to target specific colleges and universities with top curriculum programs would be essential for the Air Force in producing the force of the future that will sustain a superior workforce. The Air Force then would be able to achieve two simultaneous win-win goals with this initiative: 1) enable new STEM talent to pursue their education and 2) rejuvenate the ranks of the critical STEM billets in the Department.

4. Single Hiring Authority for Veterans: The array of complex laws and regulations regarding veterans' preference is extremely complicated, invites confusion and gives the perception of wrongdoing. The current veterans hiring portfolio can be simplified with the creation of a single DOD special hiring authority that encompasses all other veterans' hiring authorities that are currently used. This new authority would be a highly efficient, streamlined pipeline to quickly recruit and access skilled veterans into the work force. The authority would

not require public notice (a vacancy announcement). DOD would have the same veteran hiring flexibility as any Fortune 500 corporation. On the spot job offers would be an option for any veteran who served honorably. Coupled with this new streamlined veterans' hiring authority, the following options for overall veterans' preference reform will be considered: 1) limit the use of veterans' preference to candidates not currently employed in the Federal government; 2) utilize title X veterans' preference hiring rules and guidance for all Mission Critical Occupations (MCOs) as opposed to title V; 3) establish a non-competitive student appointment that does not require veterans' preference; 4) establish veteran hiring percentage targets; once targets are reached, then the veterans' preference is no longer required; 5) modify the application of the veterans' preference so only wounded warriors can *float* to the top of the referral certificate as specified in chapter 12 of the DOD Priority Placement Program (PPP) Handbook.<sup>58</sup>

The existing 30 percent or more Disabled Veteran Authority (DVA) is a good example of where this process can work quickly and efficiently. With this authority, federal government managers utilize a *direct hire* type authority to hire qualified veterans'. The process works without a vacancy announcement or public notice and requires the appointee to be qualified and provide a documentation of their service connected disability of 30 percent or more. The simplification of the current portfolio of veterans hiring authorities to a single hiring authority would provide the Air Force a mechanism to easily appoint qualified veterans. Additionally, these benefits can be reaped as well; trimming hiring process times to save limited resources; allow for targeted recruitment and increase manager flexibility; and lastly it eliminates complexity and confusion for the candidates, the hiring managers and the Human Resources Specialists in the Air Force.

5. Create a DOD 'civilian brand': The Department of Defense often offers purpose-driven work such as those available under the Acquisition, Technology and Logistics (AT&L)

professions that competes very well with similar positions outside of Title V, but lacks the ability to publicize benefits and flexibilities to entice highly specialized individuals to apply. Successful brands provide an employee or applicant with key enticements that differentiate their organization from others and say "*come and work for us.*" The message they most often convey are the intangibles of employment, such as on-going training, professional development and mentoring program, and becoming an invaluable part of a team. One way of going this route, for example, would be for DOD to budget and develop an ad campaign, a presence on television and the internet. With dedicated funding, this advertising effort could be used to recruit people – who may have never considered civil service otherwise – with specific skills to occupy positions traditionally that are hard to fill. As part of the effort to attract smart, dynamic and capable individuals, the Air Force in partnership with DOD could hire an advertising agency to produce short video clips that would showcase the faces and stories of DOD civilians in a range of mission critical occupations. The videos would promote public service through joining the civil service system. Through compelling stories and imagery, the films would educate and engage Americans on the incredible career opportunities available across the Air Force. A collection of short videos, less than five minutes each, could assemble a new call to service, posted in YouTube, linked to different job search websites or target audience and space. The videos could showcase a group of diverse civilian employees in a variety of real-world settings (forward headquarters, flight lines, Pentagon) as they briefly summarize their jobs, describe how their jobs advance the Air Force's mission, and highlight the rewards (excitement, impact, making a difference) they receive from their jobs.

An integrated marketing and branding campaign would foster awareness of civil service job opportunities and as a desirable place to build a career. It would also help attract young talent who in most cases may not be aware that they can also serve their country as civilian employees.

The use of the internet, the most common medium for advertising job announcements, is one of the best ways today to reach out to all age groups, especially young applicants between 18-24 years of age. Recognizing the potential expense for DOD not to advertise could not only result in empty chairs but possibly placing the wrong candidate in them.

## **SECTION V: CONCLUSIONS**

The days of reliance on a 20th century model of human resource management to fill the vital needs of federal civil service must be radically overhauled if agencies like the Air Force are going to succeed against present and future threats. Strategic human capital management is the centerpiece in the recruitment effort and provides federal agencies the ability to operate as well-oiled machines. A high quality federal workforce is a must now, especially in the face of explosive technological change, and the growing tech know how by emerging nation state competitors. Although several initiatives have been launched since 2001 by Congress, federal agencies and OPM to address the current human capital problem, only marginal changes have been accomplished.

To recruit the cream of the crop, especially STEM candidates, OPM must go beyond tweaking existing language and policies that do not lead to real changes in the hiring process. De-conflicting the many Veteran Hiring Authorities, and returning more weight to the non-veteran resume are good starts to real change. Allowing the Air Force, for example, to research its own requirements, and decide on the compensation of the position with minimal OPM oversight is another example of this radical change. Staying the course would be granting agencies the near on- the- spot authority to streamline the hiring process to compete against the

more agile, fleet footed private sector. This ability to customize and adapt the process of recruitment creates a more level playing field for federal civil service.

Furthermore, increasing the amount of tools in the recruiters' toolbox is necessary to succeed besides USAJOBS. A good start to building this toolbox would be recruitment teams and agencies actively working with job placement departments at prestigious universities and colleges across the country. Also, ramping up funding to market Federal civil service as a desirable place of employment would be a radical change in strategy as compared to the now passive USAJOBS website that seems like it better serves employees already working for the government. The internet, television, radio and print are all great opportunities to brand civil service as a superior workplace of choice and getting that message out to the best and brightest outside of federal service is worth the cost.

The status quo of recruiting, attracting, hiring and retaining the best and brightest to federal civil service cannot be accomplished by current policies and regulations. Technological change waits for no one or no institution. If sweeping changes to hiring processes by OPM do not materialize soon, not only will the best and brightest work for an agile private sector but our technological edge at DOD will suffer too.

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid, 5.

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